

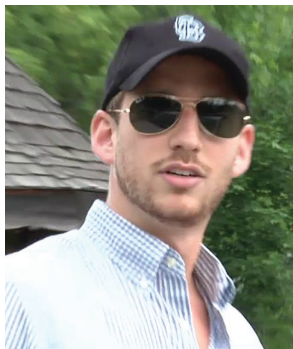


The Making of Verplanck



AN INTERVIEW WITH
MECHEL LIEBER

CO-CREATOR OF THE NEW COMEDY SERIES
VERPLANCK



Join Mitch, Avi, Feishy and Yechiel Michel Rephoel Menachem (yes, that's his name) an eclectic group of 21st century pioneers as they embark on their journey to create a new Jewish community. These urban dwellers leave the city behind and move to the boon-docks where they face new challenges with camaraderie, determination and plenty of humor.

To view episode 1 and join the fun visit www.nokoshermeat.com

BY MATI JACOBVITS

CITYSPIRIT: I watched your first episode of *Verplanck* and was totally entertained. I decided then, that I'd like to share this with *CitySpirit* readers. Thanks so much for taking the time out.

MECHEL LIEBER: I appreciate the publicity. We are trying to get the word out.

CS: What is *Verplanck*? It has a Jewish ring to it.

ML: *Verplanck* is actually a city in New York with a population of about 500. It serves as the setting for our show.

Verplanck – the show, is set in this small hick town where our four lead characters set out to start a Jewish community. G-d willing – *Verplanck* will be a continuing series of episodes or, more accurately, webisodes.

The show is presented as if it were a documentary but the viewer knows it's fake. This format is referred to as a mockumentary. The genre can be categorized as a dramedy. It's a relatively new style, a blend of drama, and comedy. Very different than *The Three Stooges* or *I Love Lucy* slapstick.

CS: What age group is it geared to?

ML: Teenage and older. The feedback we've been getting is very positive from viewers in the high teens to the high 30's. With older folks, the response has been lukewarm but with time we think the show will grow on the over 40's crowd as well. My grandmother, who's one of my life's greatest inspirations, is *kay"eh* 88 years old and she couldn't stop laughing. So maybe the 85+ crowd also gets it.

CS: How did you get involved – was this a lifelong dream of yours?



ML: Actually, no, I'm involved in *kiruv* and a while back I played a part in a short skit for Project Inspire – *Friday Night at the Hockers*. I could not believe how many people approached me afterwards to tell me they had seen the video. It had tens of thousands of hits. I was really surprised at the enthusiastic response. And it hit me – there is almost nothing Jewish to watch.

CS: When it comes to music or reading material there's so much out there.

ML: Exactly but video is almost untouched. Listen, there are serious challenges and concerns when it comes to creating video entertainment. Nevertheless, the lack of any form of kosher video entertainment has left an enormous segment of the Jewish population, from ultra orthodox (yes, even



as an imbecile. These are not proper ideals, but unfortunately they become acceptable. There is very little out there for a Jewish person to watch that's entertaining but also has a positive message with Jewish moral guidelines.

als though.

Yoely Stauber who plays Feishy and Mayer Waxman who plays YMRM had done some acting – we were very lucky to get them.

Mitch is played by Dovi Grossman, he had no experience, but its something he was interested in doing and he's very appealing.

Then there's Avi, he is played by my younger brother Shuly, he's doing it because I told him he has to. He's awesome both as an actor and a brother.

CS: Avi, Mitch and Feishy are very likable. You weren't that nice to YMRM. He comes off as very serious and intense.

ML: It's only the first episode – it takes time to build a character. Give things a chance to play out. As the narrative progresses you'll see that our characters won't be one dimensional. It is comedy, however, so there will be stereotyping for humor. Still we are not making a mockery of any one type. In fact, the overall theme is about bringing together all types of Jews to build a community. What better message of *achdus* can you find?

CS: Who does the filming?

ML: Moshe Bree, a videographer by profession. He brings a lot of creativity to the filming – the positioning of the

Continued on page 22



ultra) to non religious Jews, turning exclusively to non Jewish sources for video entertainment. The results are very detrimental to our nation. Even the "best" things available today from Hollywood don't meet minimum *tzniyus* requirements and they definitely promote ideology that is at odds with Torah.

The fact is that video is the most powerful medium that exists today. Hollywood knows this and takes full advantage of it. Films have agendas behind them and people are being influenced without being aware of it. Even Disney productions, which is relatively "kosher", is actually far from it. One movie for example that I watched portrayed some kids as the heroes and their teach-

CS: How did you come up with the story line?

ML: We wanted to put together a multifaceted group of people that in real life may have little to do with each other. What better way than to build a community? We also needed a story line that's

flexible enough for characters to come and go.

We started out with a core group of four main characters. Mitch, who is "left-center", Avi, "right-center". Then there's Feishy our *chassid* and YMRM (short for Yechiel Michel Rephoel Menachem) our *yeshivish* guy. With time we'll add more to the mix. Wait and see.

CS: Where did you get your actors? Are they experienced?

ML: We wanted it to be professional but also authentic. We auditioned professional actors – but they couldn't relate well to the *frum* content. They also couldn't pronounce *frum* words properly. The sheriff and his wife are profession-



Continued from page 21

camera – the angles – each frame sets the scene and captures the moment.

CS: How much time goes into to making one episode?

Episode 1 was 13 minutes. The actual shooting of this episode took us 12 hours, mostly done in one day. Editing took at least 15 hours. The writing – for now I'm the only writer – its hard to say how much time I actually put in. Whenever I have a thought I'd write it down. All in all I figure 40 hours of work to produce 13 minutes of footage.

CS: You had one actress, the sheriff's wife. Do you plan on bringing more women to the show?

Yes. There's no way the story could continue, be realistic and be in any way relevant without women. After the second

episode it would start falling flat. And to put men with wigs, well that would be just ridiculous.

Our target audience is viewers that are accustomed to watching, so to speak,



Hollywood style. Naturally we will be adhering to guidelines that conform to *halachah*. Not just dress code but also context. For example, an actor and actress portrayed as a married couple would have to be married in real life.

CS: Did you seek any Rabbinical guidelines?

ML: Yes. We had input from specific rabbis that understand the challenges this generation is dealing with.

Look, someone sitting in yeshiva 24/7 and has minimal outside influence on his life should not take time out to watch this show. It's not meant for him. But for the overwhelming majority of Jews whose lifestyle doesn't fit that ideal profile we are giving them a kosher alternative.

We are also creating an outlet for people to get involved. There are a lot of talented people in

the Jewish world. We've been contacted by people who want to join our crew on many different levels. A couple have already joined. I was hoping this would happen – right now I'm wearing many hats, so this is very welcomed.



CS: Will this be a money making endeavor?

ML: It's impossible to know, because there is nothing out there to compare it to. But I can say that - I, along with the entire cast, am not in it for the money. Profit will be icing on the cake.

Our motivation is to make this entertainment available and on personal levels to utilize our artistic abilities – it's very therapeutic. As for money, the first goal would be to make the show self sustaining, because right now, aside from my time, expenses are coming out of my pocket. We hope to have sponsors and even commercials, which is something new to the *heimishe* advertisers.

CS: I'm excited to see your next episode. When will it be out?

ML: Shooting begins next week. We hope to be out by Chanukah. Those who haven't seen our premiere show can visit www.nokoshermeat.com.



CS: Why nokoshermeat?

As a community, you kind of know you've made it when you have kosher meat locally available. Well, *Verplanck* has no kosher meat....yet!

CS: Anything else on the horizon?

ML: We have a few ideas. It's all in the hands of the Lord. Our production company is called *8 LASOAT* which means

the time to do. I'm doing – and if its acceptable to Him – the project will see success and it will meet its objectives. If not, I enjoy playing paddle ball too.

CS: Thanks so much for your time. Let me know if you ever have a part for a grandmother. I have a lot of practice.

ML: Hey, you never know.